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SUBJECT: PRT NAJAF: GOV'S OFFICE AWASH IN RUMORS OF ISCI
FEUD

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg D'Elia for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) This is a PRT Najaf reporting cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY: The relationship between Najaf Governor Asaad Abu Gelal Al-Ta'ie and Deputy Governor Abdul Hussein Abtan, both firmly entrenched members of ISCI's inner circle, has long been characterized within the province as disruptive and competitive. Recently, local contacts and PRT staff resident in the Governor's Compound (GC) relayed anecdotes of open power plays for ISCI control in Najaf to PRT Offs. With Abu Gelal openly not running for reelection, and Abtan clearly jockeying for his succession, the prospects are growing for a preemptive move by Abtan to assume even greater operational control of the province months in advance of the actual elections. END SUMMARY.

13. (C) The friction between the Najaf Governor and Deputy Governor is growing, according to an anecdote related by three separate Najaf-based contacts. Abtan allegedly went behind Abu Gelal's back to ISCI leader Abdel Aziz Al Hakim to complain about Abu Gelal's interference with Abtan's authority and ability to initiate large-scale construction projects, lead security matters in the province, and operate, despite his position as deputy governor, as the preeminent ISCI leader in Najaf. Al Hakim reportedly summoned Abu Gelal to Baghdad and openly sided with Abtan, telling the governor his time at the helm was functionally at an end. Another version of the rumor alleges Abu Gelal complained to Prime Minister Maliki during his last trip to Najaf, with the same result of Abu Gelal called to Baghdad and chastised by Al Hakim for interfering with the active role of Abtan.

14. (C) Long acknowledged as the governor's heir apparent, Abtan maintains a public presence as deputy governor and actively liaises with the PRT as a main interlocutor. Abtan also serves as the key provincial official for large-scale projects like the Najaf International Airport, as well as the point man to attract regional foreign direct investment in Najaf. His most recent project, the reportedly multi-billion dollar "Najaf Sea New City," aims to attract regional investment, mostly from Iran and Syria, to build a residential and business community on the lush northern shore of the Najaf Sea) a large lake located a few kilometers from the center of Najaf.

15. (C) Previously, Abtan often took the place of the governor as security coordinator for Najaf. This changed, however, during the March-April increase in South-Central violence. Abu Gelal reportedly asserted himself and personally oversaw coordination of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and orchestrated talks between local ISCI officials and Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) and Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) representatives to prevent violence from breaking out in Najaf specifically. With the PRT, the governor recently increased his overall) and historically positive and informative) relationship, including a warm welcome to the Ambassador and the PRT to its new residence at FOB Endeavor.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Numerous times over the past year contacts briefed PRT Offs on the Abu Gelal) Abtan feud. In private meetings with Team Leader, Abu Gelal and Abtan went out of their way to promote an image of harmony, often using specific examples of information discussed with PRT Offs in separate meetings to indicate real time coordination between the governor and deputy governor. The recent anecdotes, if true, indicate a widening fissure within Najaf's ISCI-dominated provincial leadership. Increasingly open challenges to Abu Gelal by his deputy will further threaten his control over his own office, let alone the province.

¶7. (S/NF) Comment continued: Abtan, despite his connection with a variety of high-profile reconstruction projects, remains distrusted by many Najaf residents in the lead up to elections. While Abu Gelal is generally spoken of as a respected, senior statesman, contacts consistently mention Abtan's alleged career prior to politics as a Badr commander. Admirers refer to him as a CEO-minded task master focused on the bottom line and concrete results, while detractors regard his heavy-handed, blunt style and open disdain for unwelcome information as personality traits of a militia commander. In his previous capacity as a Badr partisan Abtan was likely involved in Iranian-backed intelligence operations and he likely maintains close relationships with Iranian intelligence services. Abtan and ISCI are widely expected to win the governorship in the upcoming provincial elections. He is characteristically direct with PRT Offs, maintaining strong working relationships focused on investment, project completion, and additional financial resources for Najaf.
END COMMENT.
CROCKER